

Building Capacity in Maine's Cultural Communities

Contributed by
Jim Baumer.

Beautiful Sebasco Harbor Resort was the setting for a recent forum sponsored by the Maine Arts Commission. The purpose was to celebrate the accomplishments of the Discovery Research program and to discuss the next steps for grant making. The forum also provided an overview of the Community Arts Development program—a new project that emphasizes capacity building for local arts organizations in Maine.



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programs. As Keith Ludden, community arts & traditional arts associate, explained, “With any changes in programming, we try to involve the public and gather input.”

With recognition that the arts are a powerful catalyst in building quality of life in our communities and a viable component of economic development throughout Maine, comes the need to look at various programs and ways to grow artist communities and organizations across the state.

According to its strategic plan, the Maine Arts Commission has as its primary purpose the development of Maine’s communities through arts and culture. The Discovery Research program played a key role in accomplishing this goal over the past decade. Despite the experiences and successes of Discovery Research, the inventory of cultural assets and the creation of local networks to support the arts, the challenge continues to be finding ways to build sustainability within these various community cultural organizations.

With Governor John Elias Baldacci’s strong support of the creative economy as a viable economic development tool, Maine’s arts community has an important role to play. That means building sustainability becomes increasingly important as the state positions community arts development squarely in the middle of Maine’s economic development blueprint.

Dreeszen emphasized that the Discovery Research program has been successful in meeting its original goals, particularly in identifying the numerous cultural resources available and providing funding to facilitate formation of various local arts agencies. The next step is to provide an opportunity for many of these local groups to solidify their foundations and to support current infrastructure.

“The Discovery Research program has achieved what it was intended to do, which was to create interest in grant applicants



and launch new arts agencies at the community level,” Dreeszen said. “The challenge now is to shift our efforts toward building capacity within these established groups.”

Under the Community Arts Development program, initiatives that might receive funding are community-based projects that identify needs and opportunities within a particular community or region. If a local agency developed a plan of action to meet these needs, a grant proposal would be considered for funding.

Since Maine is a leader nationwide in recognizing how the creative economy represents a vehicle for economic development, creative economic development planning—or the implementation of an economic plan that ties into creative elements with an artistic focus—would be given strong consideration.

“Maine is unique in its emphasis on the creative economy,” Dreeszen said. “There is an obvious recognition of that component; Maine is different from many other states in how it ties into the creative economic model. Other states talk about it, but the arts community in Maine obviously embraces the idea. There are certain values that are inherent within both the arts and the creative economies—communities are stronger because of them, communities are more livable and people are happier—the two sort of go hand-in-hand,” he said.

Ludden echoed the idea that creative economic development is unique to Maine, as well as important to the arts community here. “As a state, we’ve put ‘legs’ under the idea,” Ludden said. “The Governor has acknowledged its importance with the creation of the Creative Economy Council.”

In fact, the Governor has been a vocal advocate of

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~ Becky Welsh,
River Valley Arts Council

Maine’s leadership in fostering a creative economic element, complementing the state’s long-term economic development outlook.

According to the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) Creative Economy Report released in 2000, Maine’s economy received an infusion of more than \$200 million yearly from the arts and arts-related organizations. This represents significant growth over the four-year period that NEFA studied the impact of arts on the economic development of the six New England states.

Additionally, NEFA’s Employment Update, released in July 2004, continued to show strength in the creative employment sector throughout New England, including Maine. Obviously, the economic importance of the arts cannot be overstated.

For the 20 or so participants, the Maine Arts Commission forum presented an opportunity to “brainstorm” ideas about projects and possible grant proposals and to receive constructive feedback about the types of projects that might receive funding.

For Becky Welsh, co-founder and board member of the River Valley Arts Council, the forum was an opportunity to witness firsthand the benefits of the Discovery Research program, which helped establish an arts beachhead in Rumford, a gritty mill town experiencing a renaissance around the arts.

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For Welsh and the 150 artists who work and create in the River Valley Region, funding through the Maine Arts Commission provides necessary support

to sustain work that’s already done.

A few examples of initiatives that might qualify under the new Community Arts Development program include:

- Programs identifying a community or region’s cultural needs and opportunities by developing a plan of action directed toward those needs.
- Community cultural assessments that use the Discovery Research process.
- Creative economic development planning or implementation of a plan that encourages creative businesses and helps retain creative professionals in a community or region. All economic-related proposals must have a strong arts component.
- Professional training or consulting to increase the management capacity of an arts organization.
- Public awareness campaigns organized around local or regional advocacy networks.

This is a small sample of potential programs and projects that meet the criteria of capacity building under the new Community Arts guidelines.

Funding continues to be an issue for the myriad of organizations and individuals who make up the state’s artistic and creative community. With federal funding representing only part of the economic mix for Maine’s creative and artistic community, the Community Arts Development program will become an important funding tool for groups and organizations across the state. Simultaneously, the goal of the Community Arts Development program continues to be building and increasing the capacity of Maine’s diverse community of organizations, thus perpetuating the arts in our state.